

# RENEGOTIATING LINGUISTIC IDENTITIES IN THE WAKE OF GLOBALIZATION

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## Abstract

Globalization, as a world phenomenon has a direct relationship with language identities, Language loss and their chances of survival. Also, with English hailed as the lingua franca and a language for possibilities and prosperity, more and more world citizens are drawn towards it, often at the cost of their native languages. While it is true that we are all staunchly moving towards one world and language uniformity ensures homogenization, yet it clashes with the principle of preserving linguistic diversity.

This poses certain questions like how is the globalization phenomenon related to issues of languages, culture and identity. What will be the effect of language loss; what roles does the linguist have to play in the process of language survival; why is language preservation needed?

This paper scrutinizes language specific issues in the wake of globalization. The issues dealt with here are: status of world language and their chances of survival; factors contributing towards language loss and language survival; effects of language loss and need for language preservation; suggested steps towards language preservation.

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**Keywords:** Globalization, Language Homogenization, Lingua Franca, Language shift, Language Survival, Language, Culture and Identity, Language Preservation

## Paper

Globalization, is certainly not a new phenomenon, yet, never before it was so fast paced as it is today. Advances in technology and telecommunication have contributed majorly towards furthering economic and cultural interdependence and have greatly paced up the globalization phenomenon. Swedish Journalist Thomas Larsson in his book “The race to the Top: The Real Story of Globalization” (2001) defines globalization as:

“The process of world shrinkage, of distances getting shorter, things moving closer. It pertains to the increasing ease with which somebody on one side of the world can interact, to mutual benefit, with somebody on the other side of the world.”

Wikipedia offers the following definition for Globalization, “The process of international Integration arising from the interchange of world views, products, ideas and other aspects of culture.”

Both the definitions put some stress on ‘interchange of views’ and ‘interaction between world denizens’. Also Globalization has brought about a tendency towards: i) migration to economically viable nations ii) exchange of cultural denominators iii) increased frequency of interaction; all of which inevitably demands a common medium. Thus arises the concept of ‘Lingua Franca’ i.e. a shared language bridging gaps between various cultures and communities. A few world languages have emerged as lingua franca, (English at the top of list) and are posing a strong threat to other world languages. There is no denying that globalization has led to this situation, at this juncture though one needs to look into two areas: i) How is a lingua franca different from a native speaker’s mother tongue (not from the phonetic perspective but from the utilitarian perspective and ii) what factors contribute towards the thriving of lingua franca (often at the cost of extinction of other languages).

To find some answers one needs to understand the concepts of ‘language utility’ and ‘language value’ for a speaker. A lingua franca offers its speakers more value and utility by increasing the speakers’ mobility and by offering more social and economic benefits. Thus happens ‘language replacement’, and much language shift and language loss could be attributed to this. Thus languages that are considered lacking in offering its speakers certain benefits like economic progress and social mobility are considered to be devoid of any ‘instrumental or practical value’ and albeit some amount of ‘sentimental value’ remains attached to the native language or the mother tongue, it is often not enough to lend the language enough vigor for sustenance. A shift towards language offering ‘instrumental value’ is considered a sensible option by majority of speakers, yet it remains a mystery that why this shift has to be complete, or to reframe the question, why the language holding ‘instrumental value’ and the one holding ‘sentimental value’ remain mutually exclusive choices?

Language codes definitely are dying off at a much faster rate than ever, and it is estimated that out of approximately 5000-6000 living world languages ( Dixon 1997), about half would vanish by the end of the present century itself. Also linguists believe that the number of languages that are not exposed to the threat of extinction is very few. As one delves deeper in order to find out the major identifiers to speakers’ language choices, the

following factors emerge strongly: i) demography ii) economic factors iii) Social Identifiers iv) mass media (Fishman 1991). Cerny presents ostler's statistics in "Language Death versus Language Survival" (2010). The statistics lists world's top twenty languages and covers both L1 and L2 speakers:

Figure1 Top twenty languages in terms of the number of speakers

List of languages	Number of speakers	List of languages	Number of Speakers
1. Chinese-Mandarin	1,052,000,000	11. Urdu	104,000,000
2. English	508,000,000	12. Korean	78,000,000
3. Hindi	487,000,000	13. Chinese-Wu	77,000,000
4. Spanish	417,000,000	14. Javanese	76,000,000
5. Russian	277,000,000	15. Telegu	75,000,000
6. Bengali	211,000,000	16. Tamil	74,000,000
7. Portuguese	191,000,000	17. Chinese-Yue	71,000,000
8. German	128,000,000	18. Marathi	71,000,000
9. French	128,000,000	19. Vietnamese	68,000,000
10. Japanese	126,000,000	20. Turkish	61,000,000

If one focuses on the presence of Indian languages on the list, two factors emerge: Hindi definitely is emerging as a lingua Franca with being third on the list. Similarly languages like Marathi, Tamil, Telegu, and Bengali also show bright chances of survival in the coming times according to the list. This could be attributed to the demographic factors like population of the speaker community, yet one cannot deny that there must be some other factors contributing towards large number of speakers of these tongues. The answer probably lies in the fact that these communities attribute 'real value' to the 'sentimental value' attached to their mother tongues. They take a lot of pride in their languages and despite being fluent in the lingua franca (which might be Hindi within the nation or English), the people belonging to the community would insist on interacting in their native tongues whenever possible. Also there is a strong insistence on passing on of the mother tongue to the next generation by the elders of community. The richness of culture and heritage is often conveyed through stories shared in the mother tongue, and children are encouraged to speak only in their mother tongues within the community. A strong majority from such communities are known to opt for an educational alternative that would give them an opportunity to increase proficiency in their mother tongue along with their chosen lingua franca. Quite interestingly places or states where speakers' community have shown strong inclination towards the mother tongue, government agencies are found to be using the native language along with English for official purposes. These factors, along with demographic factors like population, birth and death rates seem to have worked favorably for

these languages. This offers a small ray of hope, that the solution to language attrition lies somewhere in increasing the language prestige and value within the speakers' community, and a combined and sustained effort from community and policy makers may save at least a few more languages from sure death.

But before we delve further into the area, we must look at a counter perspective that is strongly emerging within the linguistic community, that whether there is a need for such an effort. The anti survival supporters argue that language extinction is not a recent phenomenon, languages have always died and they lobby for language homogenization instead. The strongest pro-survival argument that one can offer is that languages lend diversity to the world culture and acts as windows to the knowledge unique to the culture to which any particular language belong.

Kenan Malik, in his essay 'Let them Die'( 2000), argues against language renewal theories declaring that, " the whole point of language is to communicate, the more dynamic our cultures will be, because the more they will be open to new ways of thinking and doing. "

For those who believe that language and culture are mutually interdependent entities rather than mutually exclusive ones, the presence rate of language attrition remains a huge concern and must act as a bugle to action. Thus there is a need to look for tangible options towards ensuring language renewal.

A solution lies in changing the speaker's attitudes towards their native tongue. Language attitudes play a major role in deciding the chances of a particular language's survival. A community's attitude towards its native tongue may vary from being positive to negative to indifferent. These attitudes as it is observed are often linked to the degree of socio economic value or so called utility value of the language. The key towards an attitude shift is attaching more 'sentimental value' to the language; making the language a strong cultural denominator, also certain policy measures like making language policies all inclusive, instituting bilingual policy, an increased use of regional languages in official and media purposes; would all help in bringing about an attitudinal shift and thereby increasing the chances of survival of many world languages.

There is no glorification in homogenization if it comes at the cost of multiculturalism and multilingualism. True that the death of certain languages is inevitable, yet we must preserve and save as many as we can, if only to maintain diversity. The threat to languages not only threatens cultural diversity, it leads to the extinction of a community's identity. A language never dies alone, along dies the vast reservoirs of knowledge, and each last speaker of a particular tongue carries to his grave thousands of years of shared knowledge.

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